DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 597 FL 013 906

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TITLE The French Immersion Students in Europe: An Informal Report of the Experiences of Several Young Canadians. Research Report 80-08.
INSTITUTION Ottawa Board of Education (Ontario). Research Centre.
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Ontario Educational Research Council (November 1980).
PUB TYPE Reports - General (140) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acculturation; *Adjustment (to Environment); Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *French; *Immersion Programs; Second Language Learning
IDENTIFIERS France

ABSTRACT

Student adaptation involved in moving from an elementary school in English Canada to a French school in Europe was investigated. Information was gathered from 35 students. About half had gone from an early French immersion program to a French language school in Europe. The others had either attended French schools in Quebec or schools using a language other than English or French. Generally, students from an early immersion program who entered a French school in Europe felt an initial period of language inadequacy. Students with less French background had the greater difficulty in gaining language skills. The key to social adaptation for younger students was making friends. Older students had firmer ties to Canada and less commitment to their new school lives. Canadian children felt themselves to be behind their French peers in many aspects of the academic program. After the initial adjustment period, students tended to make steady gains and reach a fairly high level of competency in French by the end of the year. It was concluded that factors such as age, previous language training, and personality influence the rate of adaptation to schooling in a foreign country. (RW)

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The French Immersion Student in Europe:

An Informal Report of the Experiences of Several Young Canadians

by

Margaret Wightman

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FL013906

RESEARCH REPORT 80-08

Prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the

Ontario Educational Research Council

November, 1980

research centre / centre de recherches
The Ottawa Board of Education / Le Conseil scolaire d'Ottawa
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INTRODUCTION

With the transient nature of our society it is not unusual for children to change schools, communities or even countries somewhere during their years of formal education. In Ottawa, a substantial proportion of the school population is enrolled in one of the bilingual programs aimed at promoting an increased facility in the French language. Occasionally students from these programs go with their families to spend an extended period of time in a French speaking country. It was suggested that it might be of interest to look at the experiences of these students who have had a certain amount of training in the French language, and ascertain how they manage in a completely French situation.

The primary intent of this paper is to look at the adaptation involved in moving from a school in English Canada to a French school in Europe. In doing this it is felt that another perspective may be gained of some of the effects of the bilingual programs.

As suggested by the subtitle, "An Informal Report of the Experiences of Several Young Canadians", this is not a report of a formal research study. The information to be relayed has been gathered by examining some of the related literature, questioning parents and teachers who have been involved with such transfers and by having, myself, taken three children from immersion programs to be educated in the French school system for a year.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Probably the main impetus for this report is the interest shown by colleagues and acquaintances in the experiences of our children during our recent stay in France. Due to my husband's sabbatical leave our three sons spent the 1978-79 academic year attending local schools in Montpellier, a city in the south of France. Previously, they had all been enrolled in early immersion programs and at 8, 10 and 12 years of age would have been in grades 3, 5 and 7 had we remained in Ottawa. In France, the two younger boys enrolled in the local elementary school which serves children at least until age 11 and sometimes until age 13. The next four or five years in the life of a French child are then spent at a "collège" which was the type of school attended by my eldest boy. The final stage of secondary education in France is obtained at a "lycée" where students are prepared for their "baccalauréat".

An ongoing interest in education and foreign cultures has led me to have conversations with many people about the experiences of children in changing their country or language of schooling. However, with the knowledge that OERC would like to have a presentation on the subject of the French Immersion Student in Europe, a more organized approach to collecting information was begun. First, principals of the 19 elementary schools in the Ottawa Board of Education (OBE) which offer French immersion programs were sent a request to identify students who had spent an extended period in a French or foreign language school. Parents of such students, identified by the schools or through other contacts, were asked to complete a questionnaire concerning their child's experiences in the school visited. Several interviews were held with parents and teachers and a few of the teachers overseas were also asked to respond to questions about their Canadian students. In addition, an overview was obtained of literature related to this topic.

At the time of writing this report many of the questionnaires are still outstanding, although it now seems likely that most people who are going to respond without further prompting have done so. The general response rate has been about fifty percent; slightly higher for the schools and slightly lower for parents. To date, information has been gathered about the experiences of 35 children, approximately half of whom have gone from an early immersion program to a French language school in Europe. The others either have had different backgrounds in French, have gone to French schools in Quebec, or have gone to schools using a language other than English or French.

RELATED STUDIES

A review of the literature revealed very little information about the particular type of school transfer being examined. However, in several related areas, there was some material which contained findings and observations which might apply to the students involved in this report.

Studies have been conducted in relation to the international movement of university and college students. The numerous overseas campuses of American institutions have prompted examinations of the effects of a year abroad. Much less study has been directed toward North American students who participate in a domestic program in a foreign country. Not surprisingly, the most frequently mentioned consequence of overseas study in a country with a foreign language has been the improved facility in that language. Another apparent result is the increased awareness of different attitudes and life-styles as encountered in the host country. The author of one study of 52 Americans in European study programs noted changes in such areas as self-confidence, self-esteem, appreciation of one's capabilities and worth, and understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the American culture in comparison to that

of other countries.[1] The same group, who were judged to be above average in intellectual and interpersonal skills, also mentioned experiencing a broadening of interest and greater dedication to academic pursuits. Not all investigators, however, found such strongly positive results of an academic year abroad. One such study[2] matched 47 students who went to France with a group studying on the home campus. Here it was concluded that although increases in independence, self-reliance and strength of value system were noted for the off-campus group at the end of this period abroad, these changes did not persist after returning home. Of this group of overseas students, those who had left boy or girl friends at home were seen by the investigators as being responsible for the trend against their hypotheses of increased tolerance, flexibility, self-assurance and confidence.

The major assumption of a study of American students in Switzerland was that individuals differ in their method of adapting to the behaviour patterns associated with the cross-cultural experience.[3] The real learning and development which is expected in the cross-cultural setting can be greatly inhibited for certain individuals by their developmental history, their cultural heritage and images of their own country and the host country. As an example of inferior adaptive responses a description is given of a person living with a local family but not interacting with them, completely unaware of the culturally determined behaviour expressed by his own actions and seeking acquaintances who most closely reflect his own cultural background. It was felt that preparation which included cultural therapy would promote more successful sojourns in the new

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1 James, Newton E. Students Abroad: Expectations versus Reality, Liberal Education, Vol. 62, No.4. December 1976, p.606.

2 Nash, Dennison. The Personal Consequences of a Year of Study Abroad. Journal of Higher Education, Volume 47, No.2. March/April, 1976. pp. 191-203

3 Morgan, Edward E., Jr. Study Abroad: A Process of Adaptation and Change. International Review of Education, Vol 21. 1975, pp. 207-215.

cultural environment. Elsewhere it was advised that students should be helped to take the middle road between complete rejection and over-acceptance of a new culture.[4]

Problems encountered by students have received attention, especially in studies of foreign students in the United States.[5] The stages of adjustment have often been described as a U-curve with three well-defined stages. The first period occurs after arrival and is likened to an exciting adventure of discovery. The low point occurs after the novelty has passed and every-day living and problems must be dealt with. The third stage is the eventual period of relative relaxation when the person comes to terms with himself and his new environment. It has been recognized that many foreign students going to the United States undergo a real shock in terms of their status feeling[6] which has lost many of the usual agents of support. This feeling may vary among persons and national groups but to some extent is common to all. In a study of Indian students[7] it was concluded that the Indian students' picture of America was greatly influenced by what they perceived, in their contacts with Americans, as the American view of India.

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[4] Marshall, Thomas. The Strategy of International Exchange in Students as Links between Cultures, edited by Ingred Eide, UNESCO and the International Peace Research Institute. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1970.

[5] Klineberg, Otto. Research in the Field of Educational Exchange, in Students as Links Between Cultures, edited by Ingrid Eide, UNESCO and the International Peace Institute, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1970.

[6] Morris, Richard T. The Two-Way Mirror, The University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1960.

[7] Lambert, Richard and Bressler, Marvin. Indian Students and the United States; Cross-Cultural Images Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol 295, 1954, pp 06-72.

In discussing the adjustments of school-age immigrant children[8] it was noted that those at the secondary level have a more difficult period of transition. This was thought to be due mainly to the added stress and uncertainties of adolescence.

OBSERVATIONS

Initial Level of French

Children who have been very comfortable in a French immersion program in Canada find they are in quite a different situation on arrival in a French school in Europe. Their language background allows them to understand a substantial amount of what is being said but usually not enough to feel at ease. Often the French which is not completely understood concerns unfamiliar topics and consequently is the information most needed.

Speaking skills are usually felt by the students themselves to be less advanced than oral comprehension. Some overseas teachers were asked about initial speaking skills of their Canadian students. One French teacher in a school which had numerous foreigners from African, Asian and South American countries described an Ottawa child as speaking relatively easily and without severe or major problems. This child had completed grade 2 in French Immersion and spent a month in France before arriving in the school. A boy who had almost finished the fourth grade in immersion before enrolling in a French speaking school in Belgium was described by his teacher as being able to make himself understood.

It is likely that some of the initial delay in conversing easily in French may be due to the different accents encountered in Europe. Certainly accents can cause interference even in the first language as was demonstrated to me recently by a 13 year-old family friend. This boy, who has an excellent appetite, recalled that when he went to school in England two years ago, the English spoken by his teacher was so difficult for him to understand that he almost missed getting his school lunches!

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8 McColl, Rod, Introduction to the Immigrant Student in Secondary Schools, A Special Issue of TESL Talk, The Quarterly for Teachers of English as a Second Language, Vol. 7, No. 4, September, 1976, p. 1.

When our family arrived in France at the beginning of September, it seemed that the two younger boys had forgotten how to speak French in the two months away from classes. The eldest boy, however, had retained a certain facility in French over the summer and became the family translator for the first few weeks.

Gains in French

Most immersion children seem to make rapid gains in the understanding of spoken French and within the first few weeks begin to speak French with more confidence as well. My own children seemed to make steady progress and by Christmas could speak quite easily. About four months later, at Easter, the younger two boys seemed to use French about as easily as English; the eldest boy, however, was still more comfortable in English. It was not clear if this difference should be attributed to age, personality or substantially less contact with French friends outside of school due to school location.

Among the families who responded to the questionnaire there were a few children who had not been in early immersion programs. Not surprisingly, these children were reported to have taken several months before speaking easily. Two young students at the grade 1 and 3 levels who knew very little French before arriving in France in September, started to speak about Christmas-time and were doing very well by Easter.

It was frequently noted that the children made more rapid gains in language skills than did their parents. For this reason an assessment of the final level attained was often based on the opinions of French-speaking friends or teachers. In many cases both the overseas and Canadian teachers have noted the greatly improved quality of the children's speech. My youngest child was taught

by an immersion teacher from France on his return to Canada. In discussing expectations in schoolwork, the teacher expressed the view that considering the child's level of French he should not be regarded as an anglophone child. My second child's teacher in France noted that this boy was making very few errors and had lost most of his Canadian accent, but that he still lacked the depth of vocabulary of a French child of equal ability. As Wilder Penfield and others have noted, it seems easier for younger children to mimic sounds and thus acquire better accents. Our French friends supported this theory indicating that after almost a year in France our eldest child, who was strongest in French on our arrival, would still be recognized as an Anglophone whereas the mother tongue of his younger brothers would be difficult to determine. A phenomenon noted by teachers of children who studied in the south of France was that they also acquired much of the regional accent and, in some cases, expressions in Oc, the ancient language of the area now undergoing a renaissance.

Difficult school subjects

When asked if any particular aspect of the school program was found to be difficult, parents usually mentioned areas related to language. The grammar was often identified as being more difficult although the younger students seemed to overcome their weakness here in the first part of the year. Older children noted having difficulties with compositions. Others had trouble with the dictations, my youngest boy included. It was the third consecutive Monday of stomach pains and feeling too sick to go to school before I recognized the pattern and found that this was the time of the weekly "dictée". In his case the dictation was not based on an assignment so that he could not prepare himself for it.

School subjects enjoyed

In naming subjects which were particularly enjoyed in the French schools, mathematics was often mentioned. Some thought the program to be more difficult than the Canadian-taught mathematics but felt there was less interference from language. When the French scholastic year had ended, my children and I quickly reviewed the Canadian texts their classmates at home were using. In the case of grades 3 and 5, the material seemed quite similar although perhaps somewhat easier. At the seventh grade the Canadian program seemed to overlap the French mainly in the area of geometry. In other areas the French program seemed much more theoretical than the Canadian which, in contrast, seemed to present a very practical sort of mathematics.

Two of the children responding to questionnaires mentioned studying German while in France and, in both cases, found this a very enjoyable part of their program. The younger child, who was achieving well in the rest of his school work, said he liked the German because he found it very easy. The older child, who had entered the French school with only one year of late immersion and was having difficulties in school, found that German was one area where he was able to do as well as his classmates. In neither of these cases, or that of a 14-year-old girl studying Spanish, did it seem a problem that they were learning a third language.

School Program Differences

The Canadian children are often surprised by their school hours in France. The school day is usually longer although there is a mid-week break for part or all of Wednesday. Frequently school is held on Saturday mornings. My children calculated they spent an extra 2½ hours each week in their French school but with more weeks of holidays throughout the year, they spent about the same amount of time in school there as they would have in Canada. In terms of school work

done at home, however, the French child has considerably more even though the tendency in recent years has been to lighten this load.

For younger children in particular, handwriting caused some problems. Children are taught to write at an earlier age, sometimes without learning to print first, and some of the letters are formed differently. Another difference in program content mentioned by parents was the substantial amount of memory work, generally of French poems. This seemed a shock to some children at first but others mentioned it as a part of their studies they eventually came to enjoy. The eldest child in one of the families interviewed tried unsuccessfully in France to take a first year university course in psychology and Spanish, following the completion of an enriched French high school program in the Ottawa area. Besides having problems with the language this girl felt that she was much less able than the French students to cope with the amount of memory work required.

Some Canadian children were disturbed that they did not have the same background as their French classmates in History and Social Studies. Others found these subjects particularly enjoyable as they could relate the material taught to their European sightseeing. I was particularly impressed by the geography in my eldest child's program. In his class various countries were studied as representative of a certain conditions, such as under-development, so that there seemed to be more emphasis on learning basic geographical concepts and less on memorizing facts. Also, in relation to his geography course, his class went to Pompeii in Italy. Trains from Montpellier and Lyons met in Marseilles where they began an overnight trip to Naples. The children not only had a good look at Pompeii but also visited Capri. There was a good deal of preparation and follow-up related to this trip so that it seemed an excellent though tiring learning experience. The teachers who supervised the children were certainly

to be commended for an exhausting undertaking. They were helped in arranging the trip, however, by an association especially dedicated to such educational outings.

It seemed very common for children in the French schools to take extended trips. For younger children these were often in the form of a week spent in the country or the mountains. My 10-year-old son went with 2 classes in his school for a "Semaine de Neige" in the Pyrenees. Here they stayed in a large hotel especially set up for school children. For many it was their first exposure to snow, skiing, skating, as well as an opportunity to tour the interesting and historical sites in the area.

School Atmosphere

Some parents noted the more structured nature of the French schools was initially uncomfortable for their children. Generally Canadian children are not used to the formality of the classroom or even the formal relationship between pupil and teacher. This I realized when told by one very understanding teacher that the rest of the class was astounded by my son who dared to use the familiar "tu" when speaking to her. His Canadian teachers preferred "tu".

The very closed nature of the French schools may have been noticed more by parents than by children although one boy was quoted as saying he didn't like the feeling of being locked in. In many schools, in fact, the gates and doors are locked while school is in session. Parents enter the schools only on invitation and do not get involved in any academic processes. At one point early in our stay my 8-year-old came home at noon with the message that as his teacher was sick he didn't have to go to school that afternoon. Wondering if he had misunderstood the situation I suggested that after lunch we walk back to the school together and at least talk to the teacher in whose class he had spent the morning. On reaching the school I found my son was quite right. There were no substitute teachers

so that he could stay at home. During the same conversation I naively offered to help in the school, thinking of some non-verbal area like physical education. The teacher to whom I made this offer looked very confused, and then finally said "Oh, I almost forgot that you are Canadian". She then went on to explain that in France parent volunteers just don't exist. She very kindly, however, sent a special invitation to me the rest of the year for any outings or special events in the school for which exceptions could be made. On another occasion I entered the grounds of the "collège" attended by my eldest son, believing that parents and interested friends had been invited to his home classroom for a celebration and display of the students' work. My husband and I, and a Canadian friend who was visiting us, were stopped just inside the gate by the principal who told us there must be some mistake because she had not given permission for any visitors on that day.

One parent pointed out the benefits of having a friend or contact in the place of visit to help arrange several months beforehand for admission into the desired school. Some schools try to avoid having foreign students. Others will refuse late registrants if the classes have reached a certain size.

One welcomed feature of the French schools was the substantial lunch at very reasonable cost available to the children. It was not until spring that my younger two children agreed to stay for this meal, but once they crossed that barrier they were always very happy to go again.

Period of adjustment

In the replies to questions about the length of the adjustment period, it was apparent that factors related to personality were very influential. In general it seemed that younger children sustained more intense feelings of discomfort with their new experience but that they also passed through this stage very quickly. The most negative reaction reported was that of a 9-year-old

girl who was extremely frightened, had frequent nightmares and never really became comfortable in her new setting although she had very little trouble with either the language or the school work. Three other girls of almost the same age reported adjusting quite easily and being very happy with their school. The older children appeared to regard their overseas school experience as a temporary break from their regular life. In some respects this relieved part of the strain although at the same time they probably did not commit themselves wholeheartedly to their immediate situation. In the important process of establishing friendships, one parent felt that children make quite accurate judgements of each other without language. She mentioned that the guests invited to her daughters' birthday parties at a stage when neither spoke much French were the same friends they had at the end of the year. A boy who spent the equivalent of his ninth grade in France felt that making friends there had been easier than it would have been in Canada because each class of students stays intact for all subjects. The parent of a child who studied in a Spanish school in Mexico mentioned this child experienced particular difficulty making friends with a group of children who had always been together in a relatively small school. In this case the teacher helped solve the problem by arranging some group projects. In two cases parents spoke of how happy their daughters were in private girls' schools in France and how attached they became to the schools.

One university family involved in this study had spent a year in France and seven years later had spent a year in Quebec City. When asked to compare the two experiences they responded that they had been much better prepared in terms of language for the second sabbatical leave, but that even taking that into consideration Quebec was very much easier. The parents felt that the reaction of these two children to attending a French school in Quebec was much like it would be to any other school change within the country but that

"less than bilingual schooling would have required more drastic adjustments with a longer lag period". This family also mentioned, however, how determined an effort they had to make to minimize the English presence in Quebec City life. Only social adjustments were required by another very shy 8-year-old immersion student who went to a French school in Quebec. Her parents were very pleased that she had learned enough extra French while in Quebec to overcome a great deal of the classroom shyness and appeared after the experience to be a much more confident child.

Parents sometimes mentioned the strain on the family by their change in living conditions. Smaller living quarters, frequently apartments rather than individual homes, often no telephones, fewer friends, fewer possessions such as bicycles, and sometimes more budgetary restraints, all can become large frustations even for a temporary period. Undoubtedly, the child is influenced by the parents in responding to these inconveniences.

Parents stated that the advantages of the time spent in a foreign country far outweighed the disadvantages. Certainly the chance to improve language skills and become acquainted with another culture were seen generally as the major benefits. Other advantages noted were learning to adjust and become more flexible, gaining self-confidence in having mastered a difficult situation, broader interests in other societies and world affairs and appreciating the best in the Canadian way of life. The main disadvantage noted was the elevated anxiety level experienced by all family members in coping with the unfamiliar situation but in no instance was this felt to outweigh the positive results. The other complaint voiced by some parents was the problem of re-adjusting to the Canadian immersion program which seemed to make fewer academic demands on the children.

DISCUSSION

General opinion about the ease with which a Canadian French immersion student could enter a European French school varies between the extremes of expecting severe problems to equating this experience with any other change of school. Many parents and educators have a more moderate view and this is reinforced by the observations made in the previous section. Due to the small number of students involved and the diversity of their characteristics and schooling experiences it is premature to draw conclusions. However, support has been found for the following summary statements.

On entering a French school in Europe, students from early immersion programs did experience an initial period of feeling inadequate in language skills. This problem along with the different school structure and lack of friends made them feel quite uncomfortable for a few weeks. Students with less French background than early immersion had more difficulty in gaining language skills. Of this group, the younger students took much more time than their peers from immersion programs in beginning to speak French; the older students found the weakness in language interfered in other aspects of their school work. Irrespective of background it seemed that older students retain their knowledge of French for a longer period, whereas younger students are more successful in acquiring native-life accents and fluency. All children made faster gains in fluency than their parents.

Adaptation to the new school seemed somewhat different for students of different ages. The younger students were often more upset initially but soon became very comfortable in their new situation. The key to their happiness appeared to be making friends. The older students seemed to have firmer ties to Canada and committed themselves less intently to their temporary school life.

The Canadian children felt themselves to be behind their French peers in many aspects of the academic program, especially those related to language, but

generally made rapid gains. The younger children with previous records of high achievement in school stood near the top of their classes by the end of the year. Among the differences noted in the French program was the much greater amount of memory work. Students who studied third languages found these courses rewarding. The students adapted to most aspects of the more structured school system including the longer hours and greater amounts of homework.

Canadian parents often felt dismayed by the lack of contact with the school caused in part by language and also by the general policy of limited access to schools by parents. It was noted that the families in general were subject to additional strains due to their temporary living situation. The overall feeling expressed by parents and usually seconded by their children, however, was that the advantages of such an experience far outweighed the disadvantages.

In comparing the observations of these students with material in the literature related to older post-secondary students some similarities are found. In both cases the major gains from studying in a foreign country were seen to be in language learning and in appreciation of another culture. The younger students also were felt to have developed more self-confidence, broader interests and an increased awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of their own country.

The families contacted seemed to have very positive attitudes towards cross-cultural learning and were very capable of helping their children adapt and benefit from their experience. These children may have been better guided than the college students, described in the literature as having varying degrees of success in a year spent abroad. The phenomenon of the U-curve in adaptation patterns did not seem to apply to the immersion students although it might be interesting to ask this question of their parents. The problem of status-shock, as experienced by some foreign students in the United States, did not seem to exist for these Canadian in Europe.

CONCLUSIONS

This report has presented observations about the experiences of Canadian children who have attended schools in a foreign language. Many of the children have gone with a knowledge of French gained in an immersion program to a French school in Europe. On the whole it can be stated that these students experienced a short period of language inadequacy and then made steady gains to reach a fairly high level of competency in French by the end of a year. Not all children gained at the same rate and factors such as age, previous language training, and personality all seemed to bear an influence on the process. There seems to be a typical Canadian point of view concerning the nature of the French school system. A great deal of agreement was also evidenced about aspects of the French program found to be difficult oreasy, enjoyable or disliked. The strongest impression gained from the experiences of the children observed was that they have a sizable capacity to adapt and learn.